

Managing the impact of feral camels in an effective and humane way

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One-humped dromedary camels (*Camelus dromedarius*) were first introduced to Australia in 1840 and played a key role in opening up the arid interior for European settlement. It is thought that over a 27 year period between 1880 and 1907 approximately 20 000 camels were imported. The replacement of the camel by the motor vehicle and the establishment of a rail connection to Alice Springs in the early twentieth century resulted in large numbers of camels being released into the wild and the subsequent establishment of a feral population.

Survey work undertaken in the Northern Territory in 2001 indicated that there were possibly as many as 300 000 feral camels in Australia spread across Western Australia, South Australia, the Northern Territory and Queensland, and that the population was doubling about every eight years. For the best part of 75 years, the significant damage that feral camels were doing to the fragile ecosystems, cultural sites, isolated communities, and pastoral enterprises of desert Australia were largely out of sight and out of mind for most Australians because it occurred in sparsely populated areas a long way from the coast.

In June 2005, the Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre (DKCRC) obtained funding to develop a national management framework that would lead to a reduction in camel numbers to a level that reversed their population growth trajectory and reduced their impacts on natural resource management (NRM), economic, and social-cultural values.

A key starting point for the development of a national management framework was the recognition that the management of the impacts of pest animals should be informed by a risk management approach and be strategic in determining where management should occur, at what time, and what techniques should be used.

To reduce camel impacts, either camel numbers need to be reduced or camels need to be kept away from key assets. Camel numbers (impacts) can be reduced by humane destruction (culling), commercial harvest or exclusion. Codes of practice and standard operating procedures are currently being developed for both aerial and ground culling of camels. Fencing to protect assets from camels is expensive and has application only at the local scale. Animal welfare must be considered when fencing is used especially where this denies the animals' scarce water.

In June 2009, the Australian Government announced that it would support a DKCRC funding proposal to manage the impacts of feral camels across Australia over a four year period under the Caring for Our Country programme. Shortly thereafter, the Natural Resource Management Ministerial Council called for development of a National Feral Camel Action Plan to guide the management of feral camels and their impacts now and into the future. Animal welfare issues are central to the Action Plan.